Nature, choice and social power by Erica Schoenberger

Nature, Choice and Social Power
Erica Schoenberger
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I was intrigued when I read the details of this book, which promise that it examines through "case studies from different environmental domains" how social power shapes the choices we have available and has contributed to environmental degradation, and also that it "challenges conventional wisdoms about what we need to do now." Written by a Professor of Geography and Environmental Engineering, it is underpinned by a political economy framework and also draws on disciplines such as history, moral philosophy and science and technology studies. This cross-disciplinary focus is essential to the study of 'wicked problems' (Rittel and Webber, 1973), of which environmental issues are exemplars, characterised as they are by complexity, uncertainty, contested problems, resistance to change, and numerous possible approaches to solutions/resolution; no single discipline can provide a broad enough understanding of such problems.

The book focusses on two case studies: gold mining and the rise of the car and associated problems – specifically the dominance of the internal combustion engine and emergence of sprawling suburbs. Through these case studies, Schoenberger demonstrates how the power of individuals, classes, the market and the state have in various ways at different times influenced development in unsustainable directions. She shows that there has been no shortage of knowledge as to the detrimental effects of such developments – quoting Pliny in the first century and Agricola in the 16th on the dangers associated with mining, for example – though this has not been translated into effective mitigation action. This understanding of the limitations of knowledge as a driver of change is not new – the 'information deficit' model (Burgess et al., 1998) has been criticised for 20 years, but Schoenberger goes beyond the analysis of barriers to change by individuals (cf. Blake, 1999; Lorenzoni et al., 2007) to investigate how problematic social structures develop. In this she would win the approval of those who call for a shift from examining individual 'choices' to a focus on how social practices have evolved in ways that are unsustainable (e.g. Shove, 2010; Shove and Walker, 2010; Spaargaren, 2011).

Although often very interesting and engagingly written, it is not always clear where the wide-ranging discussion is heading. A long and detailed discourse on Columbus' character and motives for exploration, for instance, feels like a slightly self-indulgent ramble, rather than advancing Schoenberger's thesis. In other places, the argument is not entirely convincing. For example, when discussing the tendency to bury gold (literally in tombs or metaphorically in church/temple treasuries), Schoenberger seems to imply that this was a deliberate ploy to maintain the value of gold and the status of those who owned it. While scarcity may have been the effect of individuals' actions, no evidence is offered that this was the intention, and it seems more likely that rich people felt able to honour their dead or their gods with gold, rather than that they were 'playing the market'.

Perhaps the greatest fault in the mining half of the book is Schoenberg's tendency to consider environmental and social aspects of sustainability separately, failing to consider the connections between them. In a discussion on social effects of gold mining she quotes Adam Smith's condemnation of aristocrats as not being improvers, employing servants who are not productive workers. It is odd that this is not examined for its implications for environmental sustainability; since 'productive work' of the kind Smith meant involves depleting natural resources and creating pollution, perhaps employment of 'unproductive' servants has some environmental benefits. Similarly, in a discussion of how mining wealth was shared more in California than in Iberia and Latin America, there are passing references to fraud and to Native Americans being violently uprooted and dispossessed in California. Such a situation cannot be considered any more desirable or socially sustainable than other cases where locations became poorer as a result of gold mining, but this complexity is underexplored.

The case study on the car is easier to follow than the first half of the book on mining. There is a lively and engaging presentation of Henry Ford's choice of the gasoline powered engine for his Model T car, which, because of the dominance of his vehicles then led to the disappearance of other alternatives such as electric cars (which were being produced at the time). This leads into a discussion of how suburban sprawl became the norm. It is very USA-centric; Levittown ("the prototypical American suburb", according to the UK newspaper the *Guardian*[1]) is mentioned several times but never explained, for example.

[1] 'Levittown, the prototypical American suburb – a history of cities in 50 buildings, day 25' by Colin Marshall, *Guardian*, Tuesday 28 April 2015; available at https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/apr/28/levittown-america-prototypical-suburb-history-cities [accessed 29/11/2016]

This means that while there are some important points to be taken from the book about how social power and social structures create unsustainable outcomes, the specific details are not necessarily generalizable. It is clear that to understand the histories of how certain choices came to be available similar analyses for different problems and for different countries are necessary.

Potential solutions are dealt with in a brief conclusion. Schoenberger argues (p. 195) that "[a] liveable world will become possible only with a different version of capitalism and a different version of democracy", without concentrations of wealth in the hands of a few which then leads to imbalances of power. She suggests that social power equates with money at present, and that a countervailing power, of people organising to change the system, is necessary. In this I heard echoes of Naomi Klein's critique of capitalism in *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate* (Klein, 2014), though Schoenberger appears to be advocating participatory democracy through deliberation (cf. Owens, 2000) rather than direct action of the kind Klein lauds. But we need to understand "how the system has come into being and why it works in the way that it does. Otherwise we will not know what changes are both needed and possible" (p. 197). Hence the rationale for this book, which provides a very interesting demonstration of how such understanding can be gained.

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